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Carnavalesque Gardens in Tennyson's *The Princess*

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden;
and there he put the man whom he had formed. And
out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every
tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food;
the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and
the tree of knowledge of good and of evil. And a river
went out of Eden to water the garden.

– Gen. 2.8–10.

This article seeks to explore the symbolic implications of two literary gardens in Tennyson's poem in 3,309 lines of blank verse *The Princess: A Medley*. The gardens are the extensive garden of Sir Walter Vivian depicted in the outer Victorian narrative and the university garden of eponymous Princess Ida in the inset medieval tale. Both gardens will be discussed through the prism of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival outlined in *Rabelais and His World* (1965) and *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1963). Contrary to some feminist readings of the poem, the article argues that the carnival interludes delineated in the culturally and ideologically imbued garden settings can be considered as an effective instrument of social transformation and widening options for women.

Drawing on great carnivals of Medieval Europe, Bakhtin describes the spells of carnival as occasions when existing norms and traditions are challenged, freeing their participants from such established strictures as social estate, rank, age, and property, to which feminist criticism has added gender roles. Bakhtin states in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it – that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people. [...] The behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate. (122–123)

For Bakhtin, the spirit of carnival and its “festive laughter” has a true liberating potential because the set rules are subjected to rethinking and ridicule. This enables new ideas to take root in public discourse, as he explains in *Rabelais and His World*:

It demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. (11)

Bakhtin considers the carnival not only as a historical phenomenon but also emphasises the fact that “literature was infused with the carnival spirit and made wide use of carnival forms and images” (*Rabelais* 13). Such carnivalesque spirit enters also the two literary gardens in *The Princess*, which infuses them with new symbolic significations and allows Tennyson to rethink important social and political issues of the day.

The garden has been a recurrent motif in art and literature across the world. Jemima Montagu stresses its especial role in British culture, where it has “offer[ed] fertile imagery for art and literature across centuries” and “act[ed] as a barometer for the country’s changing social and cultural landscape” (“Earthly delights” n. pag.). The Biblical Garden in Eden has been particularly inspiring in the shaping of garden images in Western cultural tradition. The Book of Genesis may provide only a rudimentary description of the paradise garden, as can be seen in the motto above, but the short passage has been the source of many artistic interpretations and reinventions of the mythical garden, depending on the time of their production. Gardens, like any work of art, are culturally shaped, as Mara Miller explains in “The Garden as Significant Form”:

One reason gardens can be successful at revealing the perceived order between macro- and microcosm is that in their very existence they carry evidence of their successful integration of the larger world into the garden. (273)

An avid reader of Dante, Milton and Shakespeare, Tennyson must have been well aware of the rich symbolic implications of gardens, especially as in another work, *Maud* (1855), he created one of the most famous Victorian literary gardens. In *The Princess*, gardens become an apt space for transgressing assigned social boundaries and introducing new possibilities to the public sphere.

The Prologue of *The Princess* sets the scene with Walter Vivian junior and his six university friends visiting his father’s country estate on a special occasion when the gates of his apparently extensive garden have been opened for the benefit of all his tenants, workers, guests, and family for a feast of Mechanics’ Institute:

Sir Walter Vivian all a summer’s day
Gave his broad lawns until the set of sun
Up to the people: thither flocked at noon
His tenants, wife and child, and thither half
The neighbouring borough with their Institute
Of which he was the patron.

(Prol., ll. 1–6)

It seems to be no accident that *Paradise Lost* is echoed in the first line of the Prologue since, as Christopher Ricks records, Tennyson “would repeatedly chant out with the deepest admiration, as the finest of all” the following passage from Book I: “In amorous ditties all a summer’s day” (qtd. in Tennyson 222). This reference brings to mind the Garden of Eden and heralds Sir Walter’s garden as yet another version of this idyllic and utopian place, at least during the spell of the special festivities, when the neighbouring tenants, workers, students, and scientists all mingle together to admire the recent achievements of contemporary science:

For all the sloping pasture murmured, sown
 With happy faces and with holiday.
 There moved the multitude, a thousand heads:
 The patients leaders of their institute
 Taught them with facts.
 (Prol. ll. 55–59)

The multifarious crowd could observe such experiments as the demonstrations of various fountains, telescopes, electricity, a miniature steamer, a fire balloon, a miniature railway and even how the telegraph works (Prol. ll. 59–79). Sir Walter’s garden is depicted as an integral part of his house, there are hardly any plants or greenery mentioned, though, but for “the broad ambrosial aisles of lofty lime,” “a tower of crimson holly-hoaks” and the elm trees swerved by “approaching rookery” (Prol. l.87; Con. l. 82; ll. 96–97). Instead of detailed descriptions of verdure, “flowers of all heavens” grow side by side with the displayed artefacts pertaining to the venerable lineage, wealth, education and broad scientific interests of their owner:

and on the pavement lay
 Carved stones of the Abbey-ruin in the park,
 Huge Ammonites, and the first bones of Time;
 And on the tables every clime and age
 Jumbled together; celts and calumets,
 Claymore and snowshoe, toys in lava, fans
 Of sandal, amber, ancient rosaries,
 Laborious orient ivory sphere in sphere
 The cursed Malayan crease, and battle-clubs.
 (Prol. ll. 13–21).

Although the carnivalesque scene of a happy and dancing crowd may be connotative of disorder, the whole garden is very orderly. Watching from the Abbey ruins above, the narrator describes a carefully stylised scene that gives the impression of order and peace: “The park, the crowd, the house [...] / The sward was trim as any garden lawn” (Prol. ll. 94–95). A benevolent host, Sir Walter joins the happy revellers, “now shaking hands with him, now him, of those / That stood the nearest” (Con. ll. 92–93). Such free familiar contacts constitute an essential part of the carnival spirit. It is clear that Sir Walter’s garden symbolises the civilised life, wealth, status, cultivation, benevolence, and good taste of its owner, “a great broad-shouldered genial

Englishman,” whose aristocratic authority is the stronghold of the country’s welfare and future prosperity (Con. l. 85). It belongs to the tradition of *hortus conclusus*, literally an enclosed garden associated with the Garden of Eden, a prelapsarian paradise. Its enclosure is clearly marked in the text when the sunset signals the end of the carnival festivities and all the guests head for “the garden rails” and say their farewells (Con. l. 80). The Conclusion of the poem adds an extra meaning to Sir Walter’s garden since it becomes an emblem of Victorian England itself, symbolising the power of tradition and wisdom together with the progress of positive change. The symbolic connection between Sir Walter’s garden and the present-day England can be further stressed by a line cut from the 1850 edition of the poem. “The nineteenth century gambols on the grass,” as the observant narrator comments on the merry scene in front of him (qtd. in Tennyson 229). The seven university colleagues climb a slope in the garden and admire a beautiful, peaceful and prosperous country. England like an enclosed garden is protected by the sea from “the skirts of France,” unruly and rift with violent social unrest:

God bless the narrow sea which keeps her off,
 And keeps our Britain, whole within herself,
 A nation, yet the rulers and the ruled –
 Some sense of duty, something of a faith,
 Some reverence for the laws ourselves have made,
 Some patient force to change them when we will,
 Some civic manhood firm against the crowd –
 But yonder, whiff! there comes a sudden heat,
 The gravest citizen seems to lose his head,
 The king is scared, the soldier will not fight ...
 Revolts, republics, revolutions ...
 (Con. ll. 51–65)

It seems important to add that Victorians loved pleasure gardens, which can be illustrated with the great popularity of the Rosherville Gardens among Londoners throughout the era. Jonathan Peacock calls the famous nineteenth-century gardens “an epitome of Victorian England”: “Their operation was almost exactly contemporaneous with the reign of Queen Victoria, and in many ways their rise and eventual decline mirrored that of the period. [...] The new gardens at Rosherville in their various manifestations were a mirror image of many aspects of the Victorian era itself” (64). Similarly to the magic of science in Sir Walter’s garden, the owners of the Rosherville Gardens organized numerous amusements and displays of curiosities to attract visitors, for instance fireworks, hot-air balloon events, and such “delights on offer” as “six-five-foot skeleton of a whale, [...] the curiously preserved body of a Peruvian woman, a model of the ship *The Great Eastern*, and a circular gipsy tent at the centre of the maze” (Peacock 77).

Finally, it is tempting to observe that Sir Walter’s garden may symbolise the poem itself, with its heterogeneous variety, a small panorama of Victorian society and the mixture of the present and the past. *The Princess* has puzzled readers ever since the

time of its first publication with its generic instability, its blending of the boundaries between the enveloping Victorian frame and the medieval tale, and constant veering from a “mock-heroic gigantesque” to “true heroic – true sublime” (Con. ll. 11–20). The metaphor of book-as-garden was ubiquitously exploited by Renaissance authors and anthologists of poetical, religious and philosophical texts, as Randall Anderson explains:

This notion of poems as flowers, blossoms, posies, or nosegays, or the volumes that contained them as gardens, paradises, garlands, arbours, or bowers, had great currency in the early modern period. [...] See, for example: *Flowers of Epigrammes* (1557), *The Paradyse of Daynty Deuises* (1576), *Britons Bowre of Delights* (1591), *The Garden of Muses* (1600), *A Garden of Spirituall Flowers* (1609), *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577). (254, 257–258)

Sir Walter's garden like Tennyson's medley assembles the multifarious into a cogent whole.

All in all, the carnival respite in Sir Walter's garden infuses all participants with peace and hope for future prosperity of England at large, which is depicted in the reassuring faith of the narrator that such cross-class encounters will gradually alter and redress all social wrong. The spirit of carnival has planted the seeds of positive social change and an abiding faith in the country's constant progress towards more prosperous future for all its inhabitants:

For me, the genial day, the happy crowd,
The sport half-science, fill me with a faith.
This fine old world of ours is but a child
Yet in the go-cart. Patients! Give it time
To learn its limbs.
(Con. ll. 75–79)

A meticulous reader may note at “Vivian place” the foreshadowing of another carnivalesque garden in the poem (Prol. l. 8). A group of women, “Aunt Elizabeth, / And Lilia [...] and lady friends / From neighbour seats” do not join the happy crowd but seek refuge within the walls of the ruined Abbey (Prol. ll. 96–98). “[T]he maiden Aunt / Took this fair day for text, and from it preached / An universal culture for the crowd” – that is how the narrator explains the educational purpose of the feminine gathering (Prol. ll. 107–109). Meanwhile Lilia dresses the broken statue of Sir Ralph in colourful scarves in a characteristic carnival act. “A feudal knight in silken masquerade” anticipates cross-dressing in the embedded medieval narrative whilst the enclosed community of learning women foreshadows Princess Ida's “University for / Maidens” with its adjacent garden (Prol. l. 227; I. ll. 149–150). One may equally infer that the venerable knight's disguise heralds challenging the assigned gender roles during the spell of carnival at Ida's university. In her in-depth study of the poem, Lindal Buchanan associates “noncarnival life with authoritative, patriarchal discourse and carnival interludes with feminist beliefs and values.”; she argues that Ida's “feminist” garden may also reflect a spirited debate about women's demands for proper education in the 1840s (575). Since the University has been founded in “a certain summer

palace,” Buchanan considers the fact as a sign of a carnival brevity of Ida’s scheme (I. l. 146), explaining that “despite the powerful carnivalesque implications of this feminist community, Ida’s project is doomed from the start. For example, its setting in a summer palace evokes the passing seasons and the play of summer vacations, as well as attaching a sense of transitoriness to the undertaking” (578).

The Prince, who has been betrothed to Princess Ida since childhood, decides to investigate the matter of her broken vow and, together with two friends in feminine disguise, enrolls to the university as a student. “And you look well too in your woman’s dress,” he is later told (IV. l. 508). The University and its garden are guarded by thick walls, heavy gates, the statue of Pallas and “a plump-armed Ostleress” (I. l. 223). When the male impostors get the first glimpse of the garden at midnight, it appears to be a perfect setting for love encounters like many other literary gardens such as the Garden of Pleasure in *The Romance of the Rose* or the Bower of Bliss in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*:

[...] the splash and stir
 Of fountains spouted up and showering down
 In meshes of the jasmine and the rose:
 And all about us pealed the nightingale,
 Rapt in her song, and careless of the snare.
 (I. ll. 214–218)

Rose and jasmine are enumerated among the flowers growing in the “blissful bower” of Milton’s Paradise, not to mention the rich symbolic association of the former with love, fresh feminine beauty and virginity (IV. ll. 690–703). Ignoring the tradition that the nightingale sings a lament, Milton stresses the amorous message of the bird’s melody and makes the nightingale an emblem of love: “She all night long her amorous descant sung,” while Adam and Eve “lulled by nightingales, embracing slept” (IV. l. 603, l. 771). So sensual a garden also entails the eventual failure of the Princess’s “maiden fancies” and anticipates the time when “Love in the sacred halls / Held carnival at will, and flying struck / With showers of random sweet on maid and man” (I. l. 48; VII. ll. 69–71). The disguised Prince could repeat the bridegroom’s words from “The Song of Solomon,” where the metaphor of the bride as a secret garden is used: “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed” (Song of Sol. 4.12). The close-locked garden, or *hortus conclusus*, has become an emblematic attribute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which can be found in her numerous depictions in the late Middle Ages. Likewise, in *The Princess* female students are compared to colourful flowers “imbibing” knowledge like “thirsty plants” (II. ll. 400–401):

And in we streamed
 Among the columns, pacing staid and still
 By twos and threes, till all from end to end
 With beauties every shade of brown and fair
 In colours gayer than the morning mist,
 The long hall glittered like a bed of flowers.
 (II. 411–416)

It is in the university garden that the impostors are first made aware of the flaws in the Princess's educational venture. The garden is not only a retreat for reading but also a place where students dare speak freely about their doubts and worries: "others lay about the lawns, / [...] and murmured that their May / Was passing; what was learning unto them?" (II. ll. 438–440). Lindal Buchanan claims that "Ida's university represents a tiny enclave of carnival freedom," but it is difficult to concur entirely with the view (590). Ida's goal is to "disyoke their necks from custom," but she strives to achieve it by imposing severe rules and restrictions in the name of liberty (II. l. 127). Her students are forbidden to leave the university for three years, to correspond with family and relatives, or to speak with men. Moreover, language at university is kept under close surveillance to avoid "this barren verbiage, current among men, / ... the tinsel clink of compliment" (II. ll. 40–41). Even poems which may prove ideologically dangerous are quickly dismissed like for instance "Tears, Idle Tears," extolling the dearness of the past. Despite the aforementioned facts, overall, Princess Ida's university is depicted as a transgressive place, compared to the controversies of the French Revolution at the end of the poem:

Revolts, republics, revolutions [...]
 Like our wild Princess with as wise a dream
 As some of theirs – God bless the narrow seas!
 I wish they were a whole Atlantic broad.
 (Con. ll. 65, 69–71).

In the end, the Prince dons glistening armour in his father's war camp, "an image signalling the end of carnival and renewal of noncarnival life" (Buchanan 577). Princess Ida orders the university gates to be opened, with "many a maiden passing home / Till happier times" (VI. l. 359–360). Similarly, Lilia disrobes Sir Ralph's statue in the Victorian frame, which "marks the completion of a cycle and the end of holiday at Vivian-place" (Buchanan 577). The summer palace and its adjacent garden have ceased to be places where women could acquire academic knowledge and have been turned into a nursing home for the wounded knights.

It seems interesting to note that the image of the garden as an ideal feminine retirement for a learned woman appears in the correspondence of the eighteenth-century "Queen of the Blues" Elizabeth Montague with her Bluestocking circle of friends. "At least since the beginning of the century," writes Stephen Bending, "women had been able to look to a model of female retirement as some form of learned feminist utopia that stressed at once the rejection of fashionable commercial society and the embrace of salutary meditation on worthier topics" (556). Also, Montague was well aware of another notable kind of the garden – a pastoral-romance setting for love and seduction (Bending 570), used by Tennyson in Princess Ida's university garden in *The Princess*, as argued above.

Ever since its first publication in 1847, critics have been debating whether the poem presents the feminist or anti-feminist view upon the loud campaign for women's emancipation at the time. Feminist scholars have been far less optimistic

regarding the poem's ultimate message. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims that the poem "is about the enforcement of women's relegation within the framework of male homosocial exchange" and its conclusion contains "the zestful destruction of that world [of a female university] root and branch, the erasure of its learning and ideals and the evisceration of its institutions" (120). Likewise, Donald E. Hall argues that "Tennyson deals with this sort of rebellion in *The Princess*, in which women's voices are, in fact, stilled and an oppressive concept of women's sphere reiterated" (52). It seems, however, that Princess Ida is not merely "a broken nurse" in the end since the carnival insurgency within the walls of her garden has afforded her the opportunity to publicly articulate the urgent demands for the emancipation of women thoroughly described by John Killham in his seminal account of the poem's social and cultural context of the 1840s – *Tennyson and The Princess: Reflections of an Age* (Buchanan 573). Ida may be forced to close her university, but she has gained a fresh opportunity to implement her reformist and forward-looking ideas as a future queen who is promised to rule in partnership: "Henceforth thou hast a helper, me that know / The woman's cause is man's," declares the recovering Prince (VII. ll. 242–243).

In view of this, it may be concluded that Tennyson draws particular attention to the language of gardens and the symbolic freight they carry in *The Princess*. Sir Walter Vivian's garden seems to stand for the benevolence, aristocratic heritage and wealth of its owner or even could embody Victorian England itself as a progressive country of law and order. As has been argued above, the metaphor of the poem as garden may be invoked, which can be traced to the early modern miscellanies and anthologies devoted to "the cultivation, as well as to the harvest, of the Renaissance *hortus poeticus*" (Randall 252–253). Conversely, Princess Ida's university garden symbolises the discontents of women about the inadequacy of female education and voices increasing demands for female emancipation in the 1840s. It is a transgressive garden where not only the assigned gender roles but also the country's apparent stability and social conditions as pictured in Sir Walter's garden are questioned. Both the carnivalesque gardens in the poem create a fruitful space for new possibilities and social changes to be introduced to the mainstream of public attention.

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Streszczenie

Motywy karnawałowe i ich funkcje w poemacie *The Princess* Alfreda Tennysona

Artykuł poświęcony jest przedstawieniu motywu ogrodu w poemacie Alfreda Tennysona *The Princess* z 1847 roku, analizowanego przez pryzmat bachtinowskiego pojęcia karnawału. Już od starożytności motyw ogrodu często pojawia się w literaturze i sztuce jako miejsce obarczone wielością znaczeń i symboli. Ogród Sir Waltera opisany w prologu i konkluzji utworu symbolizuje nie tylko mądrość, bogactwo i nowoczesność właściciela, ale również może być uosobieniem wiktoriańskiej Anglii jak też metaforą samego utworu *The Princess* w całej jego złożoności. Uniwersytecki ogród księżniczki Idy nagłaśnia niezadowolenie i krytykę pod adresem nieadekwatnej edukacji kobiet w połowie dziewiętnastego wieku, jak również kwestionuje kulturowe procesy post-trzegania norm męskości i kobiecości. Karnawałowa nieoficjalność w obu ogrodach, rozbijająca ustalone normy i hierarchie społeczne, zdaje się wskazywać na potrzebę reform i zmian.

Abstract

The article explores the symbolic implications of two literary gardens in Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847) through the prism of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival as introduced in *Rabelais and His World* (1965) and *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1963). Sir Walter Vivian's garden seems to stand for the benevolence, aristocratic heritage, and wealth of its master, or could even embody Victorian England itself as

a progressive country of law and order. Conversely, Princess Ida's university garden symbolises women's discontents about the inadequacy of female education and voices increasing demands for female emancipation in the 1840s. It is a transgressive garden where not only the assigned gender roles but also the apparent stability of England's social conditions as pictured in Sir Walter's garden are questioned. Both the carnivalesque gardens in the poem create a fruitful space for new possibilities and social changes to be introduced to the mainstream of public attention.